



Summer 1997

37th District Legislative News

Rep. Kip Tokuda

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Dear Friend,

The 55th legislative session has ended and it's great to be back in the 37th District.

The two most significant accomplishments of our legislature, in my opinion, were a progressive welfare reform bill and a juvenile justice reform bill. As the Ranking Minority Member of the Children and Family Services Committee, I was the lead Democratic negotiator for the state's welfare reform legislation.

As a children's advocate, I am not satisfied with the Legislature's "lack of investment" in our future. Children's health, safety, education, and welfare must be elevated and I assure you that this remains my goal.

Thankfully, I have received literally hundreds of calls from many of you expressing concerns or reaffirming what we are doing.

I appreciate the effort many of you made during the session and ask you to send in your comments now. Please return the form on the back of this newsletter by mail. Or feel free to call or stop by my Seattle office.

Kip Tokuda
State Representative
37th District

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Welfare

The 1997 Legislature reformed welfare, crafting one of the more progressive programs in the nation, although great challenges lie ahead. Washington's action follows President Clinton's promise to "reform welfare as we know it."

The old welfare system, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) is replaced by Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) block grants to states.

As lead Democratic negotiator for welfare reform, I worked with colleagues and Governor Locke to watch that welfare recipients were not being set up for failure in poverty-level jobs without access to affordable child care, options for low-cost health care or job training. What emerged is not ideal, but represents a more humane and workable plan for Washington's poorest citizens than that originally proposed.

Governor Locke signed the welfare bill on April 17, after vetoing approximately 20 sections, many of them based on administrative problems. Key provisions of the new welfare bill are:

- Recipients must attend intensive job search as soon as they receive benefits.
- There is a 5-year lifetime limit (except for parents who care for elderly individuals or for a child under one year).
- Parents who fail to pay child support can have their licenses suspended.
- Child care is available to all low-income workers with incomes under 175% of the federal poverty level.

What emerged from the negotiations was a broader safety net for thousands. The Democrats and the Governor took a stand that said legal immigrants should be treated equally. That differed from federal legislation which directed heavy cuts against immigrants.

It is critical that communities now be involved in developing and implementing the actual plan. I urge you to get involved.

K-12 Education

If state priorities are measured by budget allocations, education continues to be number one. Nearly 60 percent of the \$19.1 billion General Fund - State operating budget is dedicated to funding public schools, colleges and universities.

In general, the state will spend more money on education next year, but inflation and other variables will more than offset gains. When a 2.4% inflation rate is factored in, Washington is actually spending \$70 less per student next year.



Rep. Kip Tokuda meets with Rainier Beach High School students in Olympia.

There are other pressures on school funding. State-wide, school enrollment has grown faster than the general population since 1991. The number of at-risk students is increasing. Each year, Seattle school enrollment carries a greater percentage of children from poor families, as well as those needing special education and bilingual assistance. Coupled with shrinking federal dollars, our schools still face a fiscal challenge. Seattle schools estimate they will lose \$8 million next year due to inflation, program demands and increased operational costs.

It could have been worse. Early legislative plans proposed deeper education cuts. At the insistence of Democratic lawmakers and the Governor, cuts were

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softened. Complex needs funding was kept at its current level (\$2.3 million for Seattle schools). Half of the proposed cuts to magnet schools were restored (resulting in Seattle schools receiving \$620,000 less next year, instead of \$1.2 million less). Long term, stabilized education funding must be a legislative priority.

Higher Education

Governor Locke often cites education, including higher education, as “the great equalizer.” Following this emphasis, the Legislature agreed to:

- Boost college enrollment by 6,400 students in preparation for the baby boom “echo” which will bring 84,000 more college applicants in the next 15 years.
- Increase student financial aid by \$30 million.
- Implement a prepaid college tuition program, enabling parents to pay for a future college education at today’s prices.

Juvenile Justice

Following several years of attempts by Democrats to reform juvenile justice, the Legislature unanimously passed the Juvenile Justice Act of 1997, which enhances public safety and emphasizes early intervention for delinquent youth.

It offers the first comprehensive reform of Washington’s juvenile justice laws in 20 years. The bill was created by a bipartisan legislative effort along with prosecutors, judges, court administrators, defense attorneys, victims’ groups and the Governor’s Office.

We sought a realistic approach to juvenile crime that would deter future problems, not just send a “get tough” message. That approach meant increasing the number of juveniles tried as adults, while giving judges more discretion in determining which offenders are hardened criminals.

The bill is not just punitive. It emphasizes drug and alcohol services. It’s estimated that in some communities as many as 80 percent of juveniles who come before court have serious drug and alcohol problems.

Legislation also increases community involvement. It creates the Community Juvenile Accountability Act, which provides community-based programs that emphasize youth accountability for their actions, including a volunteer mentoring program pilot project.

Taxes

Faced with a budget surplus it couldn’t spend (due to Initiative 601), the Legislature gave more than \$400 million in tax breaks for the 1997-98 biennium and possibly twice that amount for the 1999-2001 biennium.

Property taxes were prominently debated this session. Property taxes have been rising across the country as assessed values escalate. Washington ranks 21st in the country for the amount of state and local property tax charged.

In 1996, the Legislature granted homeowners a one-time only 4.7 percent cut in the state portion of the property tax. That resulted in homeowners getting roughly \$17 in reduced taxes.

This year, Democrats argued for a deeper cut to homeowners, pointing out that businesses have been the primary beneficiary of the tax cuts in the last two years, garnering 92% of \$1 billion in tax rollbacks. They argued that the Democratic property tax cut, targeted to homeowners, would save most homeowners \$205 annually. On the other hand, Republicans advocated a continuation of the 1996 4.7% across the board cut for both homeowners and businesses on only the state portion of the property tax.

With both sides unable to come to agreement, Governor Locke asked lawmakers to approve a one-year extension of the 4.7% state property tax cut, pending further legislative discussions for 1998 tax relief. Lawmakers did not reach a consensus and voters will ultimately decide whether the 4.7% state property tax cut should be permanent.

Lawmakers placed the proposed 4.7% tax cut before voters in the form of a referendum on the November 1997 ballot. The referendum combines the 4.7% tax cut with a reduction in the 106% levy lid. The levy lid for the state and some local governments would become 106% or 100% plus inflation, whichever is lower.

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Representative Kip Tokuda
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Your input is valuable.

Please write to me and let me know your opinions.



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